Local Plans

In September of 2012, Ben Woolnough started as a planning officer at Suffolk Coastal district council. As a planner, his primary job was to help design and construct the council's local plan. An innocuous sounding document, the local plan is something that all councils must produce. It often spans hundreds of pages, precisely allocating how all land within a council's boundaries can be used. After four years of working on one plan he joined the private sector, but a year later he decided to return to the same council in an elevated role. Even though he left the council for an entire year, he returned to work on the very same local plan he had been working on since he started.

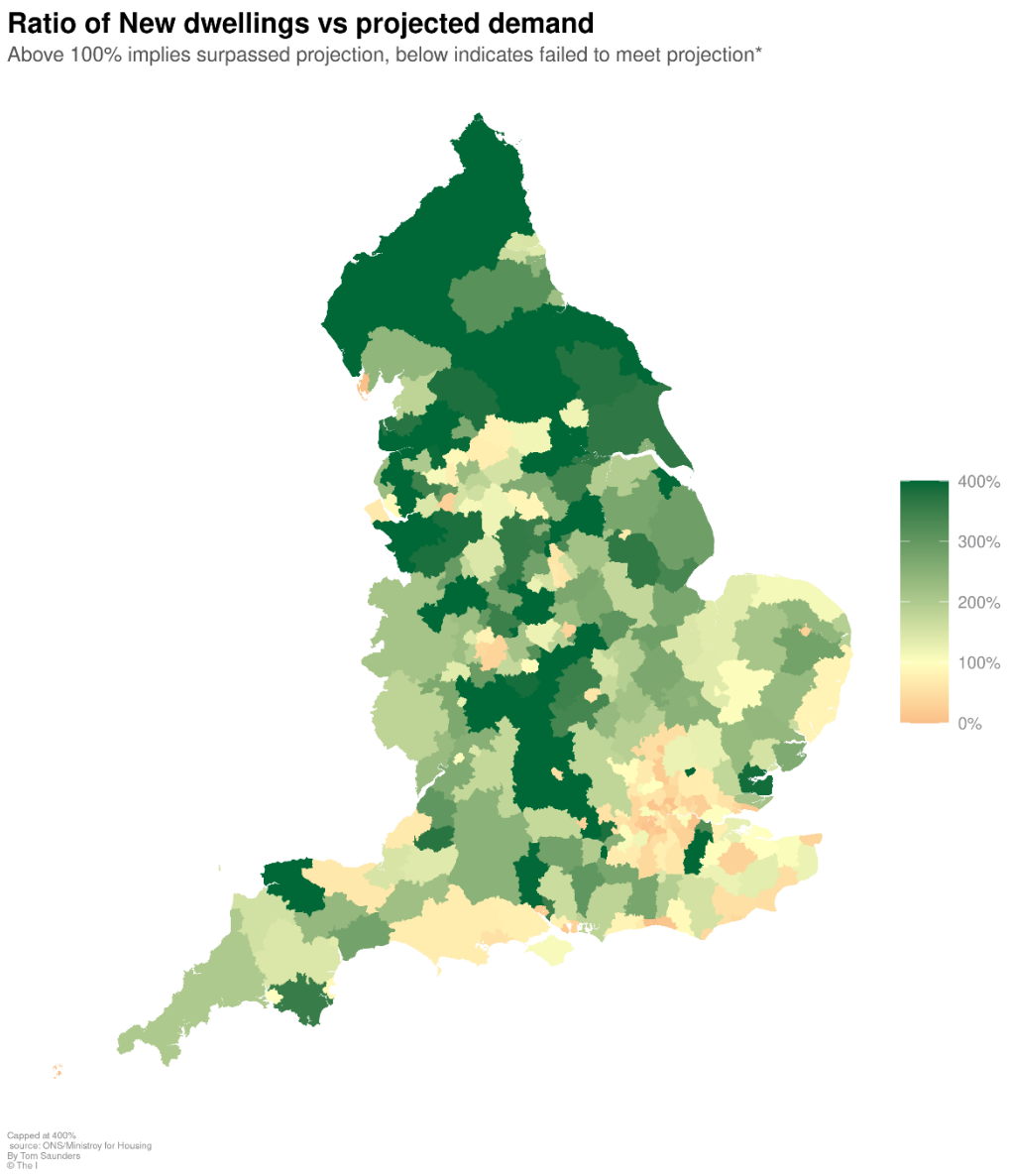
Local government is often stereotyped for its glacial pace, but in few areas of its work does this ring so true as in planning where councils spend millions and take as much as a decade to develop and approve a single plan. In Wyre Forest district council in Worcestershire, the council started working on their plan in 2012 and after various appraisals, technical studies, and consultations, they finally sent it off to the planning inspector, a civil servant who approves plans, in 2020.

However, that was not the end of the story. Ian Miller, chief executive of Wyre Forest district council, says: "We're still awaiting the inspectors final report. So, we haven't got to the point yet where we can go back to get the plan adopted. And it's highly unlikely, in fact, that we'll be able to move straight to that point because we have probably got to consult yet again. Our plan is: let's see whether we actually achieve it by February next year."

Local plans are the essence of the planning system. They determine the future of all land in the UK, whether it will become offices, houses, or parks. However, achieving a full picture of what this developable land looks like is in realty almost impossible. Paul Cheshire, an economist at LSE, discovered while trying to research the allocable land that only about half of local authorities even have a valid local plan, the process of designing them being so slow that many are often out of date soon after they are even completed. Telford and Wrekin council in Shropshire recently suspended all development on its plan, explaining that the government's changes to the planning system meant it would likely be invalid before it was even finished.

As local plans have failed to keep pace with the worsening housing crisis the Conservative government, which has often been a strong defender of the byzantine planning system, has gradually edged towards a more constrained system, determined by nationally instituted targets and regulations. However, a shocking by-election defeat in the Conservative stronghold of Chesham and Amersham by an anti-reform Liberal Democrats has already led to murmurings of a government U-turn. One of the government's marquee proposals, that housing allocation targets become legally binding is apparently already being reconsidered.

Central to this opposition is the inequality of the housing crisis: where housing is needed most, it is opposed the hardest. John Muellbauer, Professor of Economics at Oxford University, adds: "People who own property, dislike new properties being built near them because they worry about the value of their properties declining as a result of the extra supply. Therefore, the resistance to new building is going to be a lot higher in locations where prices are tremendously high."



This opposition is supposed to be mediated through the consultation process which forms part of the construction of a local plan. However, the consultation process is wrought with its own problems. Consultation was originally introduced in the Skeffington Report, authored at the tail-end of a housing boom in the late 1960s. The report led to a system where residents were consulted before their local plans were enacted, but this worked better in theory than it did in practice.

Nick Galent, Professor of Housing and Planning at UCL, says: “Getting people involved in the drawing up of an abstract plan which sets principles, but people can't visualise what those principles will really mean is more difficult than people mobilising around an actual proposal which is rendered by architects.” Most residents have little understanding of what a local plan is and local councils often struggle to communicate its real importance.

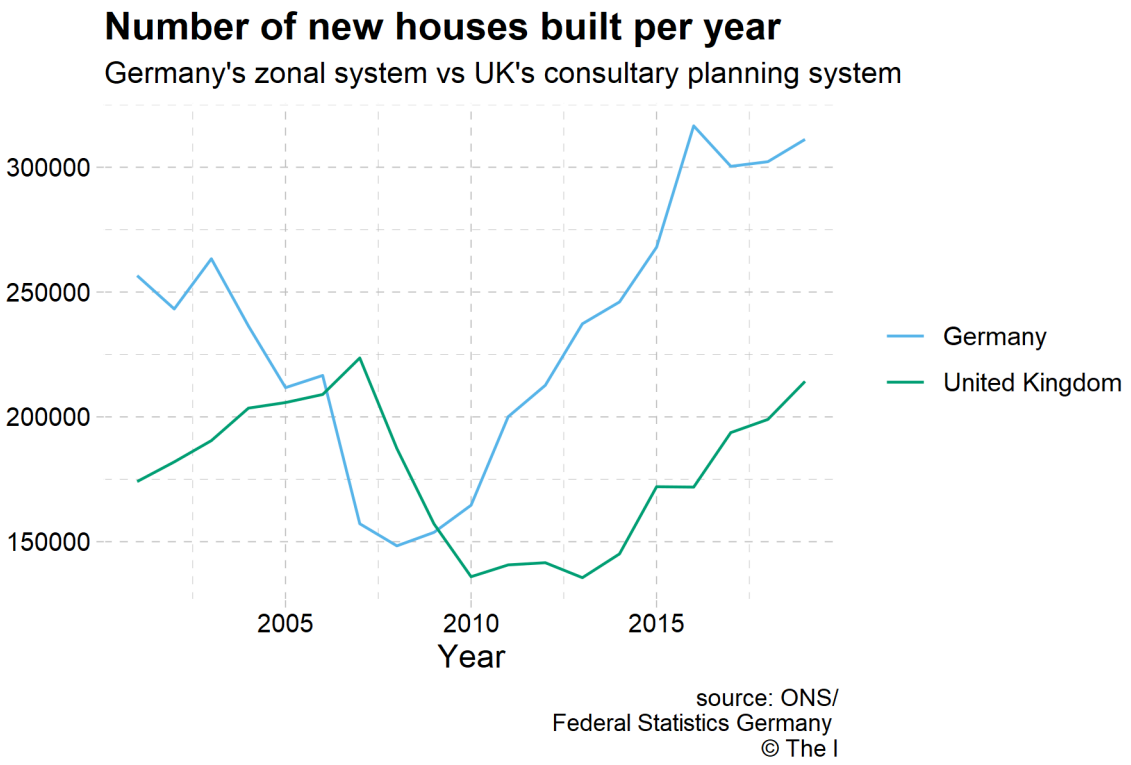
Christine Famer, from the Save Stourbridge greenbelt group, commenting on her campaign said: “The campaigns are being formed by local residents who happen to have heard about the local plan, but there's a lack of awareness locally of what's happening, largely due to the obscure and largely non-inclusive process. It's a struggle to demonstrate to people that this land they hold dear, with all its wildlife, and historical and recreational importance, is under very real threat of being lost to

future generations.” This lack of communication breeds distrust between councils and their residents, making the process of consultation even more redundant than it already is.

Richard Lewis, a planner at Active Planning, a private-sector planning consultancy, says: “There’s very little dialogue about what's happening, where people live and so I think from the very outset that builds a lot of fear of development and change because it's a lack of trust in the system from the public. Whereas if the public were involved and stakeholders were involved from the outset throughout the development of the plan, and they understood what was being proposed there would be much more accepting of development.”

Local councils themselves are under no illusions about the redundancy of the consultation process during the local plan stage but know that they have to carry it out anyway. Stephen Baker, chief executive of East Suffolk council, said: “I think the frustration from the local authority point of view is if we go out there and say we're going write a new local plan, please give us your views nobody is going to respond; we’re going to get bugger all involvement or response. But then if people then suddenly later on, once it has been approved, see there's something in it which they don't agree with they go bonkers.”

As the housing crisis rolls on, the consultation process will necessarily come under yet more criticism from those who see it as a charade that empowers development’s biggest critics, while excluding through sheer complexity those most in need of new houses. The fundamental question for future governments will be whether to do away with consultation altogether, or whether to preserve it in some updated form.



The current government has already begun to surreptitiously move towards the former through “permitted development”. This is a form of pseudo-zonal regulation, where empty office blocks can automatically be turned into housing. Ian Miller says: “Permitted development has caused a real problem in places like Harlow, where they have big offices that have been converted into very substandard living accommodation, some of them very small, there are even reports in some areas of flats that haven't even got windows.”

The issue of consultation is at the heart of the current planning system, and the heart of debates about its future. On the one hand, its critics see it as needless, intrinsically flawed and a permanent obstruction to housing development. On the other, its supporters see it as an essential part of our participatory democracy which must be defended. However, as long as the process itself fails to work it is unclear how much longer it will last.